



Plus ça Change? Observing the Dynamics of Morocco's 'Arab Spring' in the High Atlas

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democratization strategies that brought about limited reforms (Kamel & Huber, 2015) defused the opposition while the power bases of the central regime remained intact.

The monarchy and the power structures surrounding it called the *makhzen* (Willis, 2002: 7) are key actors in Morocco. The 2011 constitution did not change the fact that the king holds a powerful role as arbiter between the various forces in the population, intervening from time to time to (re)define the rules of the game (Desrues, 2013: 414). However, civic activism against authoritarian rule does know a long history in Morocco, including the 'bread riots' in June 1981 when the bread price rose due to IMF conditions. Since the mid-2000s, the number of riots and protests has increased sharply, thanks to the more liberal political climate. For example, local groups (called 'co-ordinations') affiliated with national human rights associations have regularly mobilized people to protest against increased costs of living as a result of cuts in subsidies, unemployment, or the privatization of water and sanitation services, both in urban and rural/peripheral areas (see Bennafla & Emperador, 2010; Bogaert, 2015; Lahbib, 2011: 18; Saadi, 2012). Some of these groups were or are still part of the coalition that came to be known as the 20 February Movement. The F20M is thus the 'heir to earlier demonstrations and the culmination of a broad process in which a space of protest was formed' (Desrues, 2013: 416).

While quite a few studies have examined the F20M, its strategies and outcomes (see Benchemsi, 2012; Dalmasso, 2012; Desrues, 2012, 2013; Fernández Molina, 2011; González Riera, 2011; Hoffmann & König, 2013; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012), this article focuses on centre–periphery relations, in terms of the organizational and ideological linkages and commonalities as well as on the divergences between activists in urban and rural areas. It also examines the main means of communications between these groups, and considers their perceptions in terms of outcomes, in particular certain provisions in the new constitution.

By analysing the differences between urban-based activism and rural protest, this article finds that while the F20M tried to mobilize rural populations for its purposes, the rural populations did not try to mobilize the F20M for theirs. As will be shown below, this divergence has its origin in the different understanding of what the demand for social justice represented in the two areas: while the urban-based activists focused on the constitutional arrangements and demanded mainly political change, the population in the rural areas prioritized access to basic infrastructures and services and economic development issues. Hence, peripheral populations did not discursively connect their mainly socio-economic demands to the civic democratic struggle of the central movement.

The article is organized as follows: the next section presents the methodology, followed by an analysis of the rural periphery's opportunity structure. The F20M's main actors, demands and local organization are then introduced, before addressing the main topic – the mobilization strategies deployed by the urban activists in rural areas and the constraints they faced in doing so. The article then discusses the perception of the outcomes of the F20M before concluding.

For our purpose, though, we consider the main village to be part of the periphery, dependent economically and politically on several centres: Ait Ourir, a larger town about 30 km away on the way to Marrakech, then the city of Marrakech itself where many villagers work or own property, and finally the capital Rabat, where important decisions on public services and development projects are made that impact on the village. Hence, rather than a linear centre–periphery relationship, we prefer to think in terms of concentric circles or spheres of influence at various scales which villagers can both act upon but are also impacted by. The notions of centre and periphery are thus always relational and relative.

Based on Rokkan (1999: 114), we adopt the notion of vertical peripherality (in addition to horizontal peripherality, which understands a periphery only in geographical terms) which draws our attention to the interactions between groups of actors.⁴ A periphery can thus also be described as an opportunity structure that offers various possibilities of action to its inhabitants (Rokkan, 1999: 115). These possibilities are constrained or enabled by the periphery's distance from the dominant centre(s), by differences in resources and feelings of identity, and by dependence on the centre(s) in political decision making, economically and with regard to culture. These factors can combine to create uncertainty, ambivalence and even division within the periphery's population as they may feel part of the system, yet are marginal to it, and feel that their sense of separate identity is being threatened by central agencies (Rokkan, 1999: 115).

This last point refers to the (real or imagined) boundaries between the periphery and the remainder of the territory controlled from the centre, and the degree to which they can be penetrated by transactions across them. According to Rokkan (1999: 116), such transactions can be of an economic nature (imports/exports of goods, services, labour, credits, investments and subsidies); cultural (transfers of messages, norms, lifestyles, ideologies, myths, ritual systems – we would also add communication technologies), and political (conflicts over territorial rights, blockades, alliances and conflicts or accommodations between elite groups). Going back to the idea of an opportunity structure, we can ask, 'how far do peripheral actors remain dependent on the resources of the centre and how can they realistically become more independent?' (Kühn & Bernt, 2013: 315).

In the Moroccan case, the opportunity structure of the periphery studied here (namely the mountainous areas south of Marrakech with a relatively high level of poverty⁵) was and still is limited in the sense that 'the power of the Moroccan state is thoroughly insinuated into mountain life' through officers employed by various ministries, notably the Ministry of the Interior (Crawford, 2013: 647–648, quote on 647).

Rural Morocco has historically been a de-politicized area, at least since 1960. As Hart (2000: 84) notes, apart from a series of three rural, mainly tribal revolts immediately after independence in 1956, all other riots were urban-based. Furthermore, Hart (2000: 86) argues that 'none of the post-independence tribal uprisings really threatened the Moroccan monarchy in any way'. This is probably also due to King Hassan II's strategy of preventing the emancipation of rural areas that at the time represented between 60 and 70 per cent of the Moroccan population,

the widespread refusal to apply provisions of the law on associations in effect transforms the law from what is, on paper, a declarative regime, to one that is, in practice, a prior-authorization regime. [... This indicates] that these practices emanate from a policy decided upon at a high level to weaken certain categories of associations whose methods or whose objectives disturb the authorities. (Human Rights Watch, 2009: 4; see also Bergh, 2009)

Similarly, according to an AMDH member,¹¹ the associations benefiting from the INDH are clearly an instrument of power in the hands of the regime meant to control the critical civil society emerging in the rural areas (see also Bergh, 2012).

The Islamist Justice and Charity (*al-Adl wal-Ihsan*) movement also has an increasing foothold in rural areas, as they are physically very present and rely on oral explanation of their political thoughts (see also Hamimaz, 2003). According to Fathallah Arslane,¹² leader and spokesman for *al-Adl wal-Ihsan*, another important factor is that the rural society understands and accepts with greater ease the movement's Islamic values and political vision than the more abstract discourse of the political parties, especially leftist ones.

Given this opportunity structure, apart from the Islamists, most of the associations and organizations involved in the F20M and whose representatives were interviewed for this article found it much more difficult to play their co-ordinating and mobilizing roles in rural areas (or small towns in the vicinity of rural areas) than in the cities.

Mapping of the Actors, Political Demands and Local Organization

Similar to other movements that mark the beginning and continuation of the 'Arab Spring' in Tunisia and Egypt, the F20M originated from an online movement – the movement for 'Freedom and Democracy Now' – that had successfully called for demonstrations in several towns beginning on 20 February 2011 (with 240,000–300,000 participants according to the organizers; 37,000 according to the Ministry of the Interior, in more than 50 cities; Fernández Molina, 2011: 437).¹³ According to an AMDH member,¹⁴ out of the 300,000 protesters on 20 February 2011, 26,000 were in Marrakech. the peak of the protest is considered to be 24 April 2011, with 110 demonstrations across the country, including the major urban centres as well as villages, with approximately 900,000 people taking to the streets.

The founding members of the F20M were mostly young urbanites who were already politicized as they had previously been active in one or several grassroots movements including the local co-ordinations that fought against the high costs of living and for better quality local public services; the *Mouvement alternatif pour les libertés individuelles* (MALI), which campaigns mostly for religious freedom; the struggles of the political left, trade unions, Islamist movements, the *Amazigh* movement or the Unemployed Graduates (Emperador Badimon, 2013; Desrues, 2013: 416; Hoffman & König, 2013; Sidi Hida, 2011).

national level, while the associations and the parties acted at the local level without a real centralization of the movement.

We can thus argue that the movement had an embryonic structure with some connection between a national centre and local realities. There were bodies of consultation both nationally and locally. The first were addressing the latter, which in total autonomy organized events locally. In Marrakech, the F20M protest was organized by the *conseils locaux* that co-ordinated 14 different organizations among which were associations, parties' sections and trade unions. Through these *conseils locaux* the various groups formed a network and organized the protest actions that took place regularly on Sundays in Bab Doukkala square as well as in the streets and in other neighbourhoods. However, the *conseils locaux* acted as a consultative body which co-ordinated only the groups that decided to join it, while others who did not participate pursued their own actions independently.

Indeed, the split between the two camps described earlier at the national level was mirrored at the local level, and even within the camps the various demands never gelled into a cohesive force. For example, the AMDH protest was mainly centred on separation of powers, on social justice, on the need for constitutional reform and on the violation of civil rights; the UNEM advocated for students' rights and for youth issues, trade unions focused on worker's rights and *Amazigh* associations demanded the recognition of their culture and their social political rights, etc.

Hence, even though most of the groups found common ground in issues such as social justice, the division of powers and constitutional rights, they did not become a unified political movement. Rather, our respondents argued that the movement created a unique momentum that each group tried to exploit for its own benefit.

Mobilization Strategies in the F20M

We now turn to the question of the extent of interaction and mobilization strategies between the urban-based activist middle class and the rural population during the F20M. This implies an assessment of the extent to which this interaction is based on common socio-economic and political grievances and shared values, and hence we present the analysis by actor.

As for the AMDH, the regime had accused it of being behind the outbreak of F20M protests (González Riera, 2011: 41). Our findings²¹ show that the role of the association was significant but it cannot be considered the leader of the protest as the regime and some media have tried to show. According to the AMDH's activists interviewed,²² the association's role was important with regard to the co-ordination of certain fringes of the movement in urban areas and supporting the demands emerging from the protests in rural areas. It was thanks to the AMDH's national network of 92 branches, five preparatory committees and nine regional sections²³ that the AMDH's militants were able to get news about protests, arrests and rights violations all over the country, thereby creating a system of counter-information to the official discourse. Of particular importance is the function of communication among rural and urban areas. In this sense, the AMDH militants had the triple

to him, 'peripheries remain such, marginalized and underdeveloped, forgotten until they become useful, as in the case of elections or the exploitation of resources'.²⁷

The difficulty for associations such as the AMDH to mobilize rural populations also lies in the fact that while in urban areas the protest was based on issues such as civil rights, the separation of powers, freedom of expression, the rights of young people and the right to employment and fair wages – all strongly ideological and political issues – the rural protest was characterized mainly by material claims, such as infrastructural development or access to certain resources. Examples cited by a respondent²⁸ are protests against the exploitation of water in the province of Ouarzazate and Zagora. In Zagora (a town 330 km south-east of Ait Ourir), local people started to protest against the lack of drinking water due to high levels of salinity, pollution and priority given to irrigation (Bentaleb, 2012; and AMDH member²⁹). In Ouarzazate (a town 170 km south-east of Ait Ourir), there were protests against a multinational company that is exploiting drinking water for commercial purposes, affecting local people's access to the resource.³⁰ As a member of the *Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc* (ADFM) stated, 'where the stomach is empty, it is difficult to talk about politics',³¹ highlighting a lack of linkages between basic rural needs and the political parties' and human rights organizations' claims.³²

Turning now to the *Amazigh* associations, their quest for recognition of *Amazigh* rights and culture can only be partially framed within the events of F20M, as some aspects go beyond the *Amazigh* groups' participation in the political uprising in the spring of 2011 and include an international dimension. During the fieldwork, we interviewed a member of the 'Réseau National *Amazigh* pour la Citoyenneté' (AZETTA), which is active in regional and international networks and has several local offices,³³ another member who was involved both in the national association *Tamaynaute* and the local association *Yagour* in Tighedouine, as well as an independent *Amazigh* activist.

These groups and individuals had different degrees of participation and involvement in the F20M. All maintained an equidistant position from both Islamist and leftist activists, using the space created by F20M to carry on their struggle for recognition of the *Amazigh* identity, language and culture, the fight against social exclusion, the demand for a democratic constitution that recognizes their rights, and the call for new elections on a democratic basis. The central bureau of the AZETTA left the choice of whether to participate in the F20M protests to its activists. According to its representative,³⁴ only one-third of its sections participated in the protest. The *Amazigh* activism was based on a shared sense of ethnic identity and on the widespread opinion among the *Amazigh* population that their social and cultural rights have been historically denied in Morocco. This allowed the *Amazigh* association to mobilize people both in urban and rural areas, enjoying a substantial degree of participation during the height of the F20M and afterwards.

As for the political party, trade union and student union members whom the second author interviewed, they are mainly engaged in urban areas, with the exception of the Islamist parties and movements, in particular Justice and Charity (*al-Adl wal-Ihsan*) which is also quite active in rural areas.

Our respondents agreed that the *makhzen* was the real 'winner' of the F20M mobilization, establishing itself as the main actor and the only one able to promote change, and therefore probably emerged stronger than before, or at least not much weaker. The analysis that the swift announcements of structural reforms defused the protests and kept the regime's power base mostly intact is shared by several external observers (Dalmasso, 2012; Kamel and Huber, 2015; Maghraoui, 2011; Pace & Cavatorta, 2012; Silverstein 2011).

The respondents attributed this to the F20M's strategic errors, which they see as being a lack of leadership, leading to divisions and contradictions within the movement, no clear demands for change, and the inability or unwillingness of the movement to become an actor in the constitutional drafting process. The absence in the advisory councils involved in drafting the constitution delegitimized the protest on the one hand and, on the other hand, the constitution itself. The respondents from the trade unions and political parties (UMT, USFP, PADS, CDT) were generally happy with the new constitution,³⁹ only expressing some doubts and complaints about the delay in its application, while others (mainly the AMDH members⁴⁰) concluded that the F20M protests had been entirely in vain, given the contradictions in the constitution and the lack of its application. Nevertheless, most of them agreed that at least on paper, the new constitution is certainly an improvement compared to the previous constitutions. Only the UNEM rejected the 2011 constitution entirely since they do not consider it to be democratic or changing the actual political conditions, as it does not challenge the king's role. According to an AMDH member, the constitution 'is about everything but does not guarantee anything'.⁴¹

As for the recognition of *Amazigh* as an official language (article 5), it is mostly appreciated symbolically as an important first step for the recognition of *Amazigh* culture, although some respondents were sceptical about whether and how it could be made part of the national education system. The *Amazigh* groups recognized its importance, but they consider it mostly a populist move that will not end the marginalization of their culture, and this explained their boycott of the drafting process (with the exception of AZETTA that negotiated with the *makhzen*). They fear that their language will only be used in (propagandistic) official documents or alongside Arabic and French on certain road signs.⁴²

With regard to the establishment of the Consultative council on youth and associative action (articles 33 and 170), it was considered by several respondents⁴³ as designed to conceal the parliamentarians' inefficiency as well as a dangerous means of co-optation of the best youthful human resources of the parties. A young member of the USFP⁴⁴ who had been nominated by his party as a candidate for the council refused to accept the nomination and preferred to continue his work in the Marrakech branch of the USFP because his life 'would have changed, being co-opted by the regime, with a very high monthly wage', and this would mean that he would soon lose touch with the people's needs. He was conscious though that with 'that wage the life of my family would have changed, and many young politicians are attracted by this possibility'.⁴⁵

Finally, many consider the provisions for advanced regionalization (for directly elected regional councils, article 135) as a positive first step, but the fact that the

characterized more by material claims, such as infrastructural development or access to certain resources.

Although the urban F20M events stimulated and inspired protests in rural areas, in practice there was a low level of interaction, limited to sporadic contacts between urban-based activists and citizens in the rural areas. This is due to the lack of engagement in the rural areas, particularly by political parties, and the difficulty that the more active associations such as the AMDH encountered in framing the socio-economic rural demands in terms of larger political grievances that matched their discourses in urban areas. The urban activists' attempts to support and politically frame rural protests were thus often reduced to negotiating with the authorities and providing help with technical-bureaucratic and legal matters.

The outcomes of the rural protests can be measured in terms of the increased demand for infrastructures, services and economic development in rural areas that has been, according to our respondents, partially inspired by the F20M. The protests started before the formation of the F20M and continued afterwards, but the rural peripheries continue to be marginalized and rural people do not have a very positive view, if any, of the constitutional achievements brought by the F20M.

Although many respondents stated that the F20M has failed in bringing about the hoped-for change, they admitted at the same time that the movement has created the conditions for the emergence of hitherto unheard popular demands. For this reason, most of our respondents declared that theoretically the new constitution is to be considered progressive compared to the previous ones. For example, the 'advanced regionalization' and many of the reforms contained in the 2011 constitution were deemed 'worthy of a modern country'.⁴⁹ But, at the same time, our respondents asserted that nothing had really changed for them, due to the lack of participation by representatives of the F20M in the constitutional drafting, the constitution's internal contradictions, and the long delays in passing the necessary implementing laws.

Notes

1. This is in line with Desrués' (2013: 421) argument that the main achievements of the F20M may lie in pushing the boundaries in the discursive sphere (the 'red lines' Hoffmann & König, 2013).
2. All interviews were conducted in person, except for one telephone interview (Interview 20, 2014).
3. All interview quotes in this article are the authors' translations. Most interviewees requested that we protect their anonymity.
4. This conceptualization is similar to that put forward by recent works in urban and regional sociology which emphasize the concepts of 'exclusion' and 'marginality/marginalization' and share an emphasis on the multidimensionality of group-related economic, political, educational and other disadvantages. This literature also focuses more on the processes that explain socio-spatial disadvantages (i.e. the 'peripheralization' processes), shifting from static to dynamic indicators and from attention to individuals and households to communities. Periphery is thus 'generally studied as a social relation with spatial implications' (Kühn & Bernt, 2013: 310), reflecting the horizontal and vertical dimensions in Rokkan's (1999) conceptualization.
5. The poverty rate in Al Haouz province (rural areas) was 15.8 per cent in 2007, according to the poverty map produced by the Haut Commissariat au Plan (see http://www.hcp.ma/Indicateurs-provinciaux-de-la-pauvrete-et-de-la-vulnerabilite_a648.html accessed on 1 May 2014).

35. For strategic reasons and to avoid further control and repression by the authorities, the representatives of *al-Adl wal-Ihsan* did not want us to publish details about its organizational structure and mobilization strategy in rural areas. Interviews 15 and 16, 2014.
36. Interview 2b, 2013.
37. Interview 5, 2014.
38. Of course the constitution is only one of out of many dimensions of the regime's response to the protests (see Desrués, 2013; Fernández Molina, 2011; Hoffman & König, 2013).
39. Interviews 12, 14, 20, 25, and 26, 2014.
40. Interviews 1b, 2a, 2b, 2c, 3a, 3b, and 23, 2013 and 2014.
41. Interview 1a, 2013.
42. Interview 24, 2014.
43. Interviews 1b, 2a, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 18, 2013 and 2014.
44. Interview 18, 2014.
45. The civic spirit expressed here confirms the findings by Desrués and Kirhlani (2013) on young people's activism in political parties in Meknes.
46. Interview 11, 2014.
47. See also Benchemsi (2012) for this point.
48. Interviews 1a–c, 2a–c, 3a–b, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 18, 2013 and 2014.
49. Interviews 10, 12, and 14, 2014. Quote from Interview 10, 2014.

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